

Story of cities: Viet Nam's Imperial Citadel of Thang Long

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Abstract

The citadel began as the provincial citadel of an external power before becoming the symbol of power of an independent kingdom of Viet Nam.

The imperial citadel of Thang Long was organized to reflect the continuous interaction between Dai Viet peoples and the various Chinese dynasties and their Confucian and Taoist traditions, and also with the Kingdom of Cham Pa to the south, marked by Buddhist traditions; it was rigidly formal and spaces were hierarchically arranged. The palace is a microcosm of the political world it served as the capital of and the primary residence and administrative center of the kings of the Ly dynasty and subsequently expanded by the Tran, Le and finally the Nguyen dynasty. It served this role from its construction in 1010 AD for nearly 800 years until the Nguyen dynasty chose to move the royal capital to Phu Xuan, now Hue.

The founder of the Ly dynasty, Ly Thai To, was reportedly raised in a Buddhist temple named Co Phap Pagoda in what is today Bac Ninh province, seized the throne through court intrigue after the death of Le Ngoa Trieu, the last emperor of the Anterior Le Dynasty of Dai Co Viet, and declared the foundation of the Ly dynasty in 1009 AD. Although Hoa Lu, the ancient capital of Viet Nam in the 10th and 11th centuries AD, was a strategic citadel surrounded by low mountains and far from China, was geographically too small and difficult for commerce and urban development to flourish. Ly Thai To, who had wished to implement civic development and economic growth within the realm, soon realized that Hoa Lu was not a suitable place for such aspirations and therefore needed a more spacious landscaped settlement called Thang Long which means “Ascending Dragon,” now Ha Noi, the area represented the centre of the kingdom’s territory, and a new citadel, which he began in 1010 AD— Hoang thanh Thang Long, the Imperial Citadel of Thang Long, one of the largest constructions among the feudal dynasties.

The Imperial Citadel of Thang Long was surrounded by a high rectangular wall and arranged along the North-South axis facing towards the south. This alignment is an essential element in Viet Nam architecture during the ancient and medium times which were influenced by Chinese architecture, dating back to the Chinese domination of Viet Nam from 207 to 906 BC. There was an indivisible relationship between the sacred and mundane authority buildings

and the location in Viet Nam architecture. The arrangement of buildings took on geomantic principles.

The Imperial Citadel of Thang Long combined residential, administrative, and religious functions and spaces. As the home of the king, it was intended to expounds the relationship among heaven, earth and man as the core of the traditional values. The citadel at the center of the capital of the kingdom, was the point of convergence for men from the four cardinal points. In addition to this purpose, the relocation of Dai Viet's capital helped break down the old clan and regional loyalties in Hoa Lu which had been the capital of Dai Viet under earlier dynasties.

The Imperial Citadel of Thang Long was a way to legitimize Ly, Tran and Le dynasty's rule in Dai Viet. The midpoint of the citadel was for the ruler: Kinh Thien Palace, where the court held the most solemn rituals, established the North-South axis for the entire citadel. The southern gate, Doan Mon, was built with five gates and the northern gate, Chinh Bac Mon, was built with only one gate. As the Imperial Citadel of Thang Long evolved into as it was in the late 18th century AD, there was a certain number of constructions built in the Chinese royal style to serve the rulers.

With the relocation of the capital by the Nguyen dynasty in 1805 and the conquest of the north by French colonial troops in the 1880s, Thăng Long became the headquarters of the colonial power for the French colonies in the Indochinese Peninsula and the Imperial Citadel of Thăng Long was rebuilt in neoclassical style. Hau Lau, the place built between Kinh Thien Palace and Chinh Bac Mon for living and daily activities of the queen and the princess, was renovated French colonizers in 1883. The outwardly traditional roofs were replaced by reinforced concrete.

In conclusion, the assessment of the Imperial Citadel of Thang Long's landscapes shows its historic importance as a continuous center of political power in Viet Nam. "It was believed that the inscription of Thang Long Citadel is expected for the boost of tourism, and for further international recognition of Vietnam and its governance structure after being designated World Heritage status in 2010." (Bui and Lee)

References

- [1] Huong T. Bui and Timothy J. Lee, "Commodification and Politicization of Heritage: Implications for Heritage Tourism at the Imperial Citadel of Thang Long, Hanoi (Vietnam)", *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies* 8, no. 2 (December 2015):187-202, doi: <https://doi.org/10.14764/10.ASEAS-2015.2-5>